

MAINstreet

MAGAZINE



YOUR EVENT | PAULA SMITH DESIGNS, INC. | MILLERTON, NEW YORK

Design + organization + inspiration = celebration

By Christine Bates

christine@mainstreetmag.com

The high energy, detail-oriented, graphic designer, Paula Smith, launched her premium event planning and management business just a year ago at an all female friends kick-off party. Main Street interviewed her in her studio / office in the Shekomeko Valley to find out more about her new business.

How did you end up with a graphic design business in Millerton?

I was born in Brooklyn and moved to Dutchess County with my family at ten years of age. I headed back to NYC for my education and work. When I married my husband, Jim, we decided that we wanted to purchase land and build our home and my studio somewhere in the Hudson Valley, which was a midway point between both sets of parents who were living in Fishkill and Saratoga. So we took a map, and as a pilot-artist-husband-wife team would logically do, drew a circle with a radius that would place us within a reasonable commuting distance to NYC, Stewart, and Westchester County Airports. We met with realtors every weekend or explored on our own and looked and looked until we found this idyllic piece of countryside that perfectly suited our needs.

You're the one that put together those extraordinary book fairs at Dutchess Day School. Was that when you discovered your talent for creating events?

Ahhhhh ... the book fairs at DDS! Yes, in the midst of creating these events, I realized my absolute passion for event design and planning. A clever and resourceful PA president at the time roped me into designing the graphics for a book fair hosted that year at the Merritt Bookstore in Millbrook, NY. The next year, and then for quite a few subsequently, I boldly embraced the lead design role and had the very best time conjuring up how to transform the school conference room

and gym entrance space into Kansas and Oz (with an illuminated yellow brick road and a projection of flying monkeys, of course), Dr. Suessland with a "Thought of the Day" Tickle Box filled with feathers, Willy Wonka Book Factory with a mechanical assembly contraption, and giant dog house equipped with an epic red fire hydrant for "Bark for Books." Oh the fun we had! And what good would a themed book fair sale be if the volunteers weren't in costumes? So we dressed the part. Thing 2 with a red union suit and blue wig walking in the car line greeting parents, and a *Wizard of Oz* Winkie guard charging hallways and escorting the kids to the book fair (my poor daughter, how embarrassing for her).

Working with parent-volunteers versus hired talent was a new experience for me. We had no budget, and I was not of the mindset to compromise the vision because we didn't have the funds for materials or to outsource labor. People showed up with a desire to help and I needed to quickly figure out how to best use their time and efforts, to be efficient and to make them feel appreciated. I really had to be flexible, have a backup plan in case their schedules changed, be resourceful, and lead by example. It brought me off the sidelines and before long, I realized friendships and a level of ease, comfort, and satisfaction in being able to use my creativity to raise funding for the school and to give the children and parents moments of enjoyment and a sense of community.

It was during these book fairs and fundraisers that I realized that this work was so deeply gratifying and suitable for me. I could do it in my sleep. I did create in my sleep, sometimes it was the only extra time I had. I woke up charged and had the absolute best time in the process. It felt like the work was a natural extension of me: the "fun" me, the "creative" me, the "team builder" me, the "organizer" me, the "making-kids-happy" me, the "mom" me!



Is your professional experience in graphic design with clients from Harney & Sons Tea to Eli Zabar and Ralph Lauren in New York important to your event business?

My training at The Fashion Institute of Technology and Parsons School of Design, as well as exposure working with high-end clients, gives me the skill set and developed eye to visualize spaces and to think about them in terms of designing and transformation versus simply decorating. Over the years clients have relied on me for visual merchandising, display design, showroom and interior design and installation and photographic styling, all of which lend themselves to the skills required in recreating a space or bringing attention to a particular

Above: Paula Smith. Photo: Tara Nugent. Following pages in chronological order, top to bottom: DDS Country Faire print collateral. Photo: John Gruen. Eli Zabar gift basket catalogue. Photo (catalogues): John Gruen. Photo (products): Quentin Bacon. DDopoly game board. Photo: Paula Smith. Fall Equilux Ladies Night. Photo: Quentin Bacon. Fairy party activity and costume. Photo: Quentin Bacon.

Continued on next page ...



feature or product. Being educated and trained as a graphic and package designer with a marketing minor, my design business specializes in print materials such as logotypes, labels, cartons, stationary, retail and wholesale catalogs and signage. This experience gives me an advantage in working with event clients on invitations, catalogs, unique gifting and signage for any type of event. I work with a host of printers, fabricators and vendors both locally and throughout the country and understand how to take a doodle or an idea into production. This is what I do and have done for years.

As a designer, it's critical to identify trends and be in touch with design forecasts in terms of color and fashion. Personally, I keep all of that in mind, and take from it what we need so that the vision feels current. But I think it's equally as important to create something that is unique and a few steps away from the expected.

What makes you special? How do you differentiate your services from everyone else?

I believe my design background gives me a unique advantage as an event planner. As a designer, I am comfortable with exploring ideas that are far-reaching, but also grounded in the mindset of practicality and translating a concept into something

tangible. At the same time I am an organizationally driven person who is a detail-driven perfectionist. I use both sides of my brain (really unusual for a person with an art background). I love working with people. I have a very strong work ethic because I love what I do and am dedicated. I pride myself on being "hyper" responsible. I bring a freshness and passion to what I do and at the same time I don't want to be the center of attention – it's hard for me to talk about myself (so much easier on paper!).

How do you find customers?

Although Instagram, Facebook, and our website are important, most of our customers are referrals from friends, other clients, and vendors that we already have working relationships with. These cross-referrals are especially important. People in the business recommend you because they like working with you, they trust you, they know you put your heart in the work and know that you will make them look good.

When do you talk about the budget with clients? How do you set your fees?

Let's face it; budget discussions can be challenging and even more so if the client is trying to create an event with unrealistic expectations for what they are willing to spend. Having upfront and honest communication at the onset is essential so that it can get hashed

out and all parties can move forward confidently and with ease. I prepare a budget for every event. If the plan is changing along the way, and it so easily can, and costs are being driven up, it's time to regroup and communicate. No surprises are always the end goal.

For wedding coordination, I charge hourly and for event design, planning, and management, my fees are based on each event and its particular circumstances and requirements.

Upon meeting and discussing an event with a potential client, I will provide a rough estimate based on the preliminary information available at the start of the project. Once details are refined and solidified, a contract is prepared with more accurate costs for time and materials. A booking deposit is required upon signing a contract and to hold the date.

What are the steps in planning an event?

Meeting with the client to understand their vision and role is a critical first step. During the first meeting I have a list of questions to help define what their goals are. As a designer who began her career without the aid of a computer, I have always asked new clients to bring me any tactile objects they gravitate to – a clipped magazine article, a piece of fabric or ribbon – things that speak to them. Today, screenshots of things they love on Etsy, Instagram or even Pinterest boards are super helpful visuals to clue me into how they are envisioning their own event. Meeting in their home is an ideal situation as it immediately conveys style and the little nuances that help you to understand what is important to them and what's not.

After meeting the clients, discussing budgets, presenting cost estimates and agreeing on the contract details, we sign a formal contract and a deposit holds the date. It's never too early to decide on a venue, and that is an essential first step. For clients unfamiliar with the area I offer location-scouting services. Wedding locations and guest accommodations can easily book up well over a year in advance and if a client needs a particular date, starting immediately is key. Once the location is confirmed, I start working on

the concept, resourcing vendors and materials and creating a timeline with decision points. Simultaneously I'm working on an aesthetic storyboard for client approval. Once we define and approve these steps, printed collateral is developed and put into production – save the dates, invitations, menus, and place settings. Timelines get adjusted throughout the process. Closer to the event date the focus is on management and execution and tweaking the timeline right up to the day before, if necessary.

What do you do during the event?

Once an event is underway, I am coordinating, managing, and communicating with vendors and staff to insure everything is on schedule and as-intended. I am the go-to if the client or a guest has a need or an issue. I am thinking ahead on the what-ifs and how-tos, so I am prepared to make a decision or deal with an unexpected circumstance. I always have my eyes up and ears opened while moving through the event space, kitchen, restrooms, and grounds. I have a bag of emergency essentials should the need arise – from flashlights (with new batteries) to multiple sets of readers. Remember, I am married to a pilot; therefore backup plans are just a normal part of the day. I rely on a "day-of" timeline, which is approved by the client in advance and copies are provided prior to the event. For moments such as toasts, blessings, and speeches that are particularly time critical for the caterers schedule, I will cue participants, that means finding them ahead of time and making sure they have their scripts handy (after a few cocktails) and that they know where the mic is. There are very brief moments during the event that I can actually pause and take it all in. The satisfaction of seeing the vision that for so long rolled around in my head, on paper, and in a multitude of files and emails unfolding with people sharing in a gorgeous moment together is quite moving and spectacular. It's a true heartthrob for me.

How do you find help?

I make a point of reaching out to vendors regularly to introduce myself,

visit their showrooms, shops, or workshops and learn about their crafts, specializations, styles, and offerings. I rely on building a vendor team to execute all facets of the event. I am just one part of a cohesive group of talent and skills. These relationships are important and supporting each other is a must. You get to know the vendors in the planning stages, sometimes not in person, and during set up through clean up, you are all boots on the same ground. The team aspect is one I especially enjoy.

I also have long-standing relationships in the community having lived here for so long. You get to know who does what and who does it well and who is reliable. That's who I want to work with. I have an amazing assistant trained in event planning and graphic design. I truly believed that she arrived in my orbit through grace, divine intervention, and a stroke of luck. I also have a group of hands-on local helpers that I can call upon for fabrication or on-premise assembly if needed. I will hire or recommend caterers, carpenters, seamstresses, lighting designers, photographers, entertainment, florists, parking attendants, and any other specialist as needed.

What's the most difficult part of planning an event?

In our area it's definitely transportation. Finding bus services, taxis, and limos to get guests safely back to their accommodations or pick them up at the train station and get them to the event. Valet services and parking attendants are also hard to find.

What event are you proudest of?

I'm proudest of the fundraiser concept for Dutchess Day School to raise capital to build a science wing. Everyone attending knew what the purpose of the evening was but I wanted to make it fun, unique, clever, and interactive. I relied on an old-fashioned concept but put a twist on it. "DDopoly" became an epic board game, 30 feet x 20 feet, designed around a science theme. The board game was built with four long sections of graphics printed on rolls of vinyl material and placed on a series of tables joined to make a rectangle. This replica board game was graphically designed to represent the many aspects of science education and the objects that our administrators and science teachers placed on the wish list to be purchased. Guests walked around the outer edge playing the game while several of us manned the board from the inside (with our black top hats, of course), encouraging participation. Every couple had a lanyard and the more they spent, the more "beaker" charms they would add to their swag. There was a signature blue cocktail flowing throughout the night, there was time and room to mingle, and we reached our goal with ease. Being able to combine my design



skills and creativity and turn a night of giving into a relatable, easy-to-engage and fun experience was truly satisfying.

Another proud event moment was a *Charlotte's Web* birthday party in the middle of the winter for a three-year old, whereby I was able to borrow and smuggle a McEnroe Organic Farm baby piglet into the house, hide it for two hours in a box in a bedroom and had it magically trot out of a miniature recreated barn in the hallway of the house into the birthday girl's arms. Of course before the barn door flaps opened, I made sure that the birthday girl had a bottle of warm milk and a good grip. That little piglet socialized through the complete party. The kids were tickled!

What is the most unusual request you've had from a client?

During one wedding, I peeked in to check on the couple and their bridal party signing the *ketubah* (a written agreement that is an integral part of a traditional Jewish marriage). I wanted to see how things were progressing and to make sure we were on schedule for the start of the ceremony. The bride was sitting down at the table and just looked up at me and said to me in the sweetest voice, "Could you please wash the ink off my hands?" She just lifted them up, held them there away from her white dress, and gave me a sideways smile. Off to the sink I went, returning with some soap on a paper towel and I cleaned off each of her hands. It took only a minute or two but it was unusual and endearing to be the one she looked to in that moment.

Have you ever fired a bridezilla?

I haven't and probably wouldn't. I have endured a career of working with very demanding clients and understand the emotion that comes with people who can be intensely Type A, and also intensely passionate about what they want. I have a personality that tempers and reassures the most demanding of souls.

Your website yourevent.us is elegant and super informative. Did you build it yourself?

I have designed several websites for clients, and when it came to mine, all I had was my newly designed logo, a design portfolio, mediocre photos of pro bono events, personal celebrations, and my story. I knew I wanted a clean, elegant site, not a gallery of endless photos. I wanted it to feel curated and to portray my style as well as to be easy to update and build on as my business grew. I collaborated with web programmer Wendy Duffield in building it. I don't have the mindset or skill set to program a site. Wendy gets me and was able to make recommendations and articulate my vision by customizing a template to meet my needs. Author and copy editor Kim Schaye took my text and format to make sure that it read smoothly and was grammatically correct. I commissioned a calligrapher so that the most noteworthy phrases and type aligned with my print graphics and added to the site's uniqueness.

Continued on next page ...



In September 2017, I launched “My Event” and hosted a “Fall Equilux Ladies Night” for my close gaggle of girlfriends. This evening was captured in stills by photographer Quentin Bacon, whom I’ve worked with for many years. Given that my husband is a pilot and aviation enthusiast, it seemed obvious that I should also hire a drone photographer to capture a bird’s eye view and to add this to my services. This night provided me with enough professional images to launch the site within two weeks of opening the new business.

I started the web process in mid-August and the site went live on October 19, our wedding anniversary. It was a busy time indeed as I was simultaneously in peak season with my design clients preparing for retail catalogs and the upcoming holidays and a minor detail – with a high school senior in the thick of her college process.

Is an event planner different from a wedding planner?

A wedding is a very particular and emotional event. Because of the importance the day holds for couples and families, it feels more charged. As a wedding planner, you are usually dealing with a “family of clients” verses one contact person. Very clear communication and management skills are critical with wedding clients, venue directors, and vendors because there are many more participants involved and emotions run high as the day draws near.

Becoming more popular are day-of, week-of, and month-of coordinators, which are unique to weddings. These options allow couples and families to hire a planner to step in for the last phase of the planning. Their investment in this type of support takes the pressure off as they prepare for the wedding day. They make many of the selections and decisions early on and the planner will manage all vendors, timeline, family, and guests in the month, week, or days leading up. Essentially the planner takes the reins and let’s the clients enjoy the final ride.

How can a client reduce the expense of a wedding?

First you would not hire me to save money, you would hire me because you place importance on hosting a premier event and need to work with someone who can understand your vision and execute and manage the large and small details. If I can find a bargain on materials along the way, all the better for everyone. In my estimation, there are really only a few ways to significantly reduce the cost of a wedding. The cost of rentals and tents are what they are, you can scale that back if you are willing to make concessions. You can be practical about the menu and choose a caterer that fits with your budget. Think about a buffet verses a sit down formal meal; a cocktail hour that relies on stationary appetizers verses passed *hor d’oeuvres*. Another thought is a pared down bar menu with more moderately priced wines and maybe not a full bar, but instead a signature cocktail. As far as entertainment, build your own play list, forego a live band and hire a sound technician to insure that you have the right equipment in place for quality sound. Pay them to stay the night! Nothing is worse than trying to figure out why everyone has suddenly stopped dancing. Don’t skip on help if the consequences could send you into a frenzy and compromise your and your guests’ experience.

Are repeat customers frequent in party planning?

Yes. When someone hires you for the first time to plan a celebration, you are essentially interviewing for your



next event while you are planning the current one. The time you spend working with the client, if all goes to their satisfaction, is an investment in future opportunities. Many of my clients entertain frequently. Some may plan a wedding for one child and then have another one a few years later. Corporate clients have annual events such as retreats and holiday celebrations, and not-for-profits rely on fundraisers every year. People like to have their go-to staff. You become their resource and someone they trust. I have very long-standing relationships with many of my design clients and it gets easier and easier the more you understand what their expectations are.

What’s your favorite kind of event?

Tough question. My favorite kind of event is one that creates a lasting and blissful memory for everyone that walks through the door ... be it a three-year old or a 93-year old. One that allows people to forget about the day-to-day and be present in the moment with the people they love, to have fun, to be happy. But if you forced me to commit, I’d have to say celebrating with children and escaping into their worlds to make magic happen. Anything is possible through the eyes of a child, so it becomes a designer’s and planner’s playground.

I would also have to say a wedding. It’s quite an honor to be entrusted with the design and planning of a wedding day or weekend. Working with a family on details that are unique and important to them and being able to bring my skills to make that a reality, is a joy. But I would also have to say working in someone’s home and allowing them to enjoy the

night and not be bogged down with the hosting but feeling more like a guest is gratifying.

What’s the smallest event you’ve done so far?

It was an intimate, elegant birthday luncheon for 12 people at the Tamarack Preserve. I designed the custom invitations and menus, place settings, and guest gift packaging, helped to create the menu, and directed the flowers arrangements and table setting.

What kind of event do you wish someone would ask you to plan?

I would love to design a very formal yet Mad Hatter type tea party set in a rural landscape of the Hudson Valley or create a period costume party at a historic estate or a destination event. I’m game.

Are you still active in your design business?

Of course – I’ve been doing it for 30 years. I have an established client base and know their calendars. The event business here is busiest in the summer at the same time that it’s slower with my graphic design clients. I have a reliable stable of freelance production artists that can help get me through deadline conflicts, if need be. Like most women, I’ve always juggled a multitude of roles and am skilled at keeping many plates spinning. Energy is what’s important and loving what you do. You just can’t stop when it feels right. •

To learn more about Paula, you can visit her online at www.yourevent.us or on Facebook and Instagram @yourevent.us, or call her at (518) 398-9500.

